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ABSTRACT

Three criteria must be considered in evaluating and humanizing high school speech and language arts curricula. First, interactions between teacher and student must "center on the process of responding," that is, knowledge gained should be a base for further and broader acquisition of knowledge. Second, effective language arts curricula must stress the inter-relatedness and unity of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Third, humanization of the educational process must occur to offset current trends toward mechanization and loss of basic values. (CH)

# CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING SECONDARY LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULA



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The paralysis that sets in when it is time to set the first word on paper is well known to all of us. To have survived in academia, we have been forced to analyze the malaise and work out some idiosyncratic systems of reward, fear appeals, artifical stimulation and/or self-hypnosis to get us past that moment when preliminary research is completed, some thinking has been done and it is clearly time to write. Therefore, I believe that it was more than procrastination or fear of facing my inadequacies that delayed so long this moment when I actually begin this paper. Until Senator Ervin's gavel fell at 2:00 a.m. signalling the Fourth of July recess, I could not tear myself away from the Watergate hearings. For six hours a day I watched the failures of our political system which I see more clearly than ever as the failures of our educational system. I heard young men who had graduated with honors from the most prestigious liberal arts academies justify knowingly participating in illegal and unethical acts on the basis of "team spirit." I heard men of high responsibility who chose to cope with indications of wrongdoing all around them by making a concerted effort not to know what was going on. I heard the English language perverted through the use of the passive voice ("It was decided to go ahead with the Liddy plan"); personification ("The White House suggested the cover-up." "The Oval Office authorized the Ellsburg break-in."); and pragmatic if misleading stylistic choices ("Executive privilege was not going over so all press statements were now to refer to separation of powers."). Amid all of this I heard occasional instances of probing cross-examination or serious analysis of essential moral issues. And from time to time I heard an internal voice saying, "You really should turn off the television set and begin to write about criteria for evaluating secondary language arts curricula."

Of course, at some level I knew that nothing was more relevant to criteria for curricular assessment than the kinds of ethical issues raised by the spectacle in Washington. Criteria for any particular curriculum derive from value statements about what education should be. I agree with those who argue that education is intended to help persons strive toward their fullest human potential--collectively as a species and separately as unique individuals. Specifically, an educated person should be able to perceive the range of behavioral options, understand the consequences of each option, make choices, and accept responsibility for the choices he or she has made. Watergate is only one striking example of our failure to create a society of persons aware of the consequences of choices and consciously accountable for those choices. In short, I argue that all education in every discipline is ethical and/or political education--not in the sense of transmitting a particular ethical or political value system but rather in the sense of helping persons explore their relationship to their environment, to themselves and to one another. Language arts education plays a central role in such a system since the symbolic behaviors of human beings permit them to share with others their perceptions of the world, persons and relationships.

The critical interdependence of language arts education and the ethical/political awareness I describe as the end of all education is illustrated in Dwayne Huebner's (1966) discussion of ethical rationality in education.

> The student encounters other people and natural and man-made phenomena. To these he has the ability to respond. Indeed, education may be conceived to be the influencing of the student's response-ability. The student is introduced to the wealth and beauty of the phenomenal world, and is provided with the encouragement to test out his response-abilities until they call forth the meaning of what it is to be thrown into a world as a human being. (p. 21)

I am intrigued with Huebner's play on words because I see in it a chance to combine the all-forgiving posture of the determinists with the unrelenting accountability of the proponents of free will. Maybe those persons who condoned hundreds of thousands of deaths in Indochina are not evil but only irresponse-able. . .for some reason unable to respond

to casualty statistics with a graphic awareness of the loss of unique, irreplaceable human lives. This concept of personal and social responsibility is more than a part redefinition of ethical relativism. For while no person may tell another the correct response to a stimulus; logic, philosophy and science give us some sources of validation of stimuli so we may reasonably conclude that no response to significant stimuli in one's environment signals some sort of deficiency in one's response-ability. To have been a sentient person over the last decade and to find the women's liberation movement amusing, the Viet Nam war boring or Watergate trivial is equivalent to some sort of ethical colorblindness.

Why is it that certain people seem to be unable to respond to certain highly significant stimuli in their environment? How can people not respond to pollution, poverty, pain, or for that matter, poetry, natural beauty or another human being reaching out in friendship? One explanation of educational theorists concerned with these questions has been that the stimuli presented, particularly in schools, are not interesting or vivid or relevant enough to bother to respond to. These theorists claim then that education should create an environment of novel, intense, constant stimulation. Douglas Heath in his excellent book Humanizing Schools (1971) offers a contrary analysis. He claims that the greatest complaint of today's youth is boredom, but that paradoxically boredom may be psychologically understood as an overly sensitized consciousness. Witness the autobiography of twenty-year old Joyce Maynard (1972) who lived through Elvis Presley and the Beatles and the Stones and the hopeful Kennedy years and the assassinations, moon shots, civil rights demonstrations, peace rallies and the drug culture and states at age twenty that she has had enough excitement and change, that she would like to find a nice piece of land and a rocking chair. . . and retire!

Obviously, education for personal and social response-ability will not come primarily from efforts to intensify and diversify the stimuli presented to adolescents. As Heath observes:

> Our society is creating a very dangerous contradiction in its youth. On the one hand, we have developed a generation exquisitely aware of and sensitive to every evil of our world, committed to liberal social values, and eager to find justice and equality for all. On the other hand, we have neither

> provided our youth with the opportunities to learn the patience and skills to implement that idealism nor worked vigorously ourselves to eliminate the evils they see so clearly. (p. 18)

A sense-satiated generation will respond to stimulation to be sure, but in a binary, on/off, manner--reacting strongly to the most extreme stimuli and then closing down in self defense to several other stimuli. This survival technique they name coolness or boredom. A deep personal response to an awe-inspiring stimulus is painful, but the pain is abated or even transformed into a scary orgasmic pleasure when one is able to symbolize the response. The student who felt lonely and alienated by the inadequacy of "Far Out" as a response to the first moon walk would, of course, find subsequent moon walks "boring." And this student would have little response-ability to spare for the well-intentioned English teacher who replaced Shakespeare with Vonnegut in hope of turning on a class.

Heath's book had a great effect on my own teaching, causing my "encounter phase" to ebb when I realized that it is absolutely cruel to provide more and more intense encounters or stimuli with only minimal training in symbolizing or communicating one's responses. A junior college English program that I consulted with this year was recovering from a curriculum that attempted to teach writing through sensitizing students to themselves and their environment. The students touched velvet, sniffed lemons, wandered barefoot through the grass and wrote moderately well about their experiences. But the atmosphere of the classes became tense, subdued and unresponsive as the teachers stared at tombs of over-stimulated students who appeared to be bored to death. This particular faculty recognized the need to balance the heavy personal experiences with a variety of interesting, but more channeled, interpersonal and group activities.

If improving the quality of educational stimuli, however important that may be, does not represent the key to an effective language arts curriculum, it follows that the focus must be on student responses. In recent years much educational activity has centered around student responses as the specification of behavioral objectives has been touted as the cure for all the ills of education. The problem with this approach,

of course, is that it evaluates the product or content of the response rather than the process of responding. Huebner comments on how such approaches violate his notion of response-ability:

> The human being with his finite freedom and his potential participation in the creation of the world, introduces newness and uniqueness into the world, and contributes to the unveiling of the unconditioned by the integrity of his personal, spontaneous responsiveness. His responses to the world in which he finds himself are tokens of his participation in this creative process, and must be accepted as such. Forcing responses into preconceived, conditioned patterns inhibits this participation in the world's creation. Limiting response-ability to existing forms of responsiveness denies others of their possibility of evolving new ways of existing. (p. 21)

It is obvious that specifying the content of student responses tis indoctrination rather than education. Yet the impact of the behavioral objectives movement has been so great over the past decade that one author of a recent article found it necessary to state, "Carefully designed teaching strategies are as essential to a coherent curriculum, lesson, or instructional system as are carefully specified objectives" (Joyce, 1972, p. 150). Who would imagine that we would come to a point where an author feels compelled to comment that what goes on between teachers and students is an important part of the educational process and seems to find it a somewhat radical suggestion that such encounters are as important as lists of behavioral objectives? I have a number of other reservations and concerns about the current obsession with behavioral objectives. For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to summarize these points in the words of Arthur Combs (1972), "The behavioral objectives approach is not wrong. It would be easier to deal with if it were. The danger lies in that it is partly right, for in the realm of human affairs, nothing is more dangerous than a partly right idea." (p. 1)

So far I have indicated that at this moment in history my criteria for judging almost anything--including language arts curricula--relate to enhancing individuals' abilities to respond to their environment and to be aware of the consequences of their behavioral choices. I have discussed two categories of criteria that do not seem to lead to that ability. We cannot judge a language arts program by examining the stimulus materials used and we cannot judge it by looking at lists of

behavioral objectives. A curriculum aimed at improving response-ability must focus on the process of responding. No document or flowchart can tell us whether a curriculum meets that criteria. I find that when I say that a certain school has a good language arts curriculum, or a fair one, or a poor one, that I think primarily of the people who make curricular decisions and the interactions that they have with one another and with students.

This brings me to the point where I should tell you about my perusal of the literature on curricular design and evaluation. I stare at a stack of books with such titles as Strategies for Planned Curricular Innovation and Curriculum Handbook for School Administrators and I find that many of the readings deal with the management tasks of education or present criteria that seem to apply to programs or documents rather than to persons. For example, Wickert's (1973) list of twenty-four criteria for a good curriculum includes items like: "The curriculum tasks to be done are understood by the respective groups and committees" and "Experimentation and research are employed as integral parts of the curricular improvement process." There are other lists equally long and well organized that state curricular criteria that no one would argue with (McNally, Passow, et. al., 1966; Office of Professional Development, NEA, 1966; Saylor and Alexander, 1966). I hesitate to call this body of literature boring; first, because the scope and depth of my review was limited, and second, because I realize that I could be revealing that it may have provided such dazzling stimulation that my over-satiated senses closed down. But I do find the "school of business" language and the lack of emphasis (for example, placing frequency of committee meetings on a par with recognition of individual differences) somehow offensive. If it is not wrong, it is still in Combs' language only partially right to speak so dispassionately of such important issues. So I offer three criteria that seem to shape my own responses when I say that a particular secondary school has a "good" language arts curriculum.

A. The interactions between teacher and student center on the process of responding. Parker and Rubin (1968) offer four suggestions for a process-oriented curriculum that are easily related to language arts instruction:

1. A retooling of subject matter to illuminate base structure, and to insure that knowledge which generates knowledge takes priority over knowledge which does not.
2. An examination of the working methods of the intellectual practitioner: the biologist, the historian, the political scientist, for the processes of their craft, and the use of these processes in our classroom instruction.
3. The utilization of the evidence gathered from a penetrating study of people doing things, as they go about the business of life, in reordering the curriculum.
4. A deliberate effort to school the child in the conditions for cross-application of the processes he has mastered--the ways and means of putting them to good use elsewhere.

The fourth point suggests my second criterion.

B. An effective language arts curriculum stresses the inter-relatedness and unity of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The course structure of such a curriculum might be divided into year-long blocks or a myriad of short courses and electives, but in the minds of administrators, teachers, and students the general goals of response-ability and responsibility would be more important than any aspect of the curriculum. Such divisions or categories as exist are based on the various processes of perceiving, responding, symbolizing, and communicating, rather than on arbitary topical boundaries such as English literature and American literature. In light of current research I would be especially skeptical of any curriculum which separated grammar, linguistics and reading instruction from vital, personal acts of communication (Conner and Ellena, 1967; Hogan, 1965; Moffet, 1968; Shane, 1959). Our own greatest concern about unity and continuity, of course, lies in the relationship of speech communication instruction to the other aspects of language arts curricula. Huebner (1966) states that "speech may be considered as a basic form of man's response-in-the-world" and cites Heidegger's definition of speech as man's reply as he listens to the world (p. 21). The centrality of speech in language arts instruction has been discussed by writers from both speech and English (Cayer, 1971; DeBoer, 1962; Pooley, 1966; Tacey, 1960). Finally, a unified language arts program would not have a rigid sequential pattern. Neither would it be totally aimless and spontaneous. Ulin (1973) reconciles the need to provide a multiplicity of opportunities for naturalistic language use and the need to provide some sort of sequencing by recommending James Moffet's suggestion that language arts instruction should proceed (In a

fluid and irregular manner) "from the personal to the impersonal, from low to high abstraction, from undifferentiated to finely discriminated modes of discourse." (p. 204) Moffet's book, A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers (1968), represents the best resource I am familiar with which describes how all aspects of the language arts may be unified by the use of small group discussions, creative dramatics and the use of student writing as reading material.

My third criterion for evaluating a language arts curriculum is controversial and difficult to express but it is perhaps the most important because it deals with the people involved in implementing the curriculum. There is only a modicum of facetiousness in my phrasing of this criterion.

C. People worry a lot. I sometimes try to locate the source of this value that I find myself applying to so many human activities. Is it a carry-over of protestant morality that insists that future salvation can only be built on present suffering? Is it an outgrowth of the rhetorical tradition that truth emerges from dialectic and conflict? Does it spring from the existential notion that persons reach humanness and freedom through an agonizing confrontation with the constraints and contradictions that reality imposes? Or is my positive evaluation of worrying just a dissonance-reducing device used to justify my own response to most situations? Whatever the source of this criterion, I know that I could not be greatly impressed by a language arts program where the people involved were too calm, complacent or sure. I would not look for masochism or for conflict over personalities, power or politics. But I would expect to find intellectual tension, serious confrontation and painful, personal grappling with paradox and ambiguity in interactions among curricular planners and in classrooms. The most intellectually sound essay on curriculum that I found was Mills' "In Search of Ambiguity" (1971). She argues that those responsible for curricular design have been too quick to accept a single educational worldview; either the scientific, the praxeological, the philosophical, the historical or the intuitive; and to judge their efforts by the standards of that view. Mills believes that curricular problems are too important to allow this convenience. Tenets of each approach are needed

for good decisions even though inconsistencies are apparent. She states:

> . . .it is not only futile but destructive to insist upon certainty as the goal of curricular inquiry. To remain emergent, humans must escape from their ontogenetically or phylogenetically based need for resolution of questions and strengthen instead their openness to search. They must value ambiguity as the stimulus by which they are forced onward and thus escape obsolescence and extinction. (p. 735)

James Bugental's startling essay, "Someone Needs to Worry" (1969), claims that the ability to worry, to care, to be concerned, is the essence of humanness. It is this capacity that makes human decisions different from those of machines or rulebooks. We should value our worries and concerns as indicators that we are in the process of some very human act, rather than hastening to eliminate them. In our own discipline we are changing our terminology from conflict resolution to conflict management to acknowledge that intrapersonal, interpersonal or intergroup conflict is not always an unhealthy state.

Writers in the area of curricular design are fond of referring to the etymology of the word curriculum, claiming that it seems to come from "to run in circles." They proceed to remedy this sad state by presenting tidy linear designs. Personally, I find the former metaphor more engaging than the production line images their alternatives call up. Perhaps Robert Frost would have said, "One could do worse than to be a runner in circles." I like the picture of a moving, active, concerned group of decision-makers running in spirals perhaps, rather than circles. I have seen the results of neat, efficient divisions of response-ability in such organizations as the Committee to Re-elect the President.

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